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A Sociological Study on the Importance of Rai Delicacies in the Preservation of their Ethnic Identity in Kalimpong District

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Abstract

This study explores how the Rai delicacies enable the Rai community of Kalimpong district to preserve and maintain their cultural identity. Data was collected with the help of semi-structured interviews with 30 participants who were of the ages between 18 to 60 years and above. The research shows the importance of traditional Rai dishes, mainly wachipa as a symbol of identity that separates the Rai community from other ethnic groups. The findings from the study stresses on three key themes which includes, culinary tradition and ethnic identity, the interaction between tradition and innovation and the challenges and consequences of modernisation and urbanisation on Rai cuisines. The narratives from the participants reveal that Rai cuisine not only has spiritual and ritualistic significance but is also the symbol of maintaining ethnic identity and traditional practices of the community. The results reveal the growing consciousness among the Rai community members to point to the important role played by food in the preservation of their ethnic identity, which is appearing as a major requirement of the community in the ever changing social milieu. Some respondents were also concerned about the declining knowledge of culinary tradition among the younger generations due to the pressure of external religious influences. Therefore the growing idea about culinary entrepreneurship is understood as a strategic measure to maintain cultural identity. Nevertheless, this research ultimately reaffirms that food goes beyond ensuring sustenance to being an integral part of community identity, cultural resilience, and social unity within the Rai community, particularly in the face of modern challenges. In the light of these findings the study suggests further quantitative research to widen the understanding of how food in general, negotiates ethnic identity in a larger perspective.

Keywords: *Food; Rai Delicacies; Preservation; Ethnic Identity.*

Introduction

The idea of "food", being a product of material culture, something that humans have created, is an identifiable fact that the concept itself is a social construct. The idea of "food is a necessity, not a luxury" becomes more convincing when we consider that eating is vital for human survival and will persist as long as civilization exists, referring to an essential need rather than a luxury to be desired. With this realization, when society constructed the idea of food, it subsequently went on to fulfill the major social responsibility of bringing people together despite the diverse variations that exist among them. To put it simply, "it has been an excuse" for all social events as food always creates a friendly environment and is hence a necessary component of religious rituals, births, weddings, and even funerals. Thus, food more than just a source of nutrition, has long been a means of social interaction and cultural expression to strengthen the sense of social cohesiveness among members of a society. Food is also the symbol of cultural identity. As an example, the immigrants who prepare traditional meals in their new location demonstrate their effort to sustain the cultural identity in the

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foreign land. Food choices and eating habits are also influenced by social class, lifestyle patterns, socio-economic status, education, health and environmental concerns of an individual. Additionally, the differences in food preferences which can be utilized for both excluding and including people in social groups, will also eventually lead to distinctive food cultures among the members of society. Therefore food can also be the reason of conflict or unity in the society.

Food has significant cultural value, even among the Rais, an ethnic group with a rich cultural legacy who reside in Nepal and the Indian states of Sikkim and Northern West Bengal. The current study aims to investigate the entwined relationship between food and cultural identity, particularly emphasizing on how the Rai delicacies have played a prominent role in preserving their ethnic identity. Despite possessing a distinctively rich culinary tradition, the Rai community is suffering from grave challenges of cultural assimilation and erosion of tradition due to the processes of urbanization and modernization at present time in the research location. Based on this background, this research attempts to contribute to an understanding on how food can function as a means to preserve ethnic identity even in an increasingly changing globalized world. For the current study, the following research objectives are formulated.

1. To understand how the Rai delicacies play an important role in the preservation of their ethnic identity and how it ensures social cohesion among the community members.
2. To analyze whether the traditional Rai food practices are affected by the processes of modernization and urbanization and how these processes have a direct impact on Rai community's ethnic identity and cultural heritage.

Literature Review

Boutaud et. al (2016) mentioned that food as a cultural and social phenomenon transcends the idea of mere sustenance. The authors highlight that food is regarded as a vital marker of identity for the manifestation of the ideas of social class, ethnicity, gender, traditions, and lifestyles. They show how culinary traditions are frequently shaped by historical transformation, globalization, migration and continuously changing consumption patterns, while not failing to preserve the cultural heritage and collective memory. The authors, through the study emphasizes on how food serves as a medium through which individuals and communities express cultural values, negotiate identities and maintain continuity even amidst social transformation. This work, thus establishes the close relationship between food, culture and identity, making it relevant for food studies. Dahal (2019) highlighted the relationship between food, culture and identity among ethnic Nepalese in Sikkim and the surrounding areas. But food is so much more than just a survival necessity; it's the culture and identity of a society. Historical interaction with other cultures has shaped, although in differing degrees, regional, ethnic and religious identities, reflected in their diversity of food habits. The symbols of cultural identity, such as 'gundruk', 'kinema' and 'dhenroh', depict the interplay of tradition, innovativeness and taste of past and present. Even though food functions vary culturally, each group continues to create categorizations reflecting their priorities. The Nepalese in Sikkim, according to the author, thus have a cuisine culture that reflects their identity and is shaped by their social, historical, environmental and agro-climatic circumstances as well as by their traditional knowledge and life experiences. This hallmark of the Nepalese diet, as claimed by the author is the intricate interplay between food habits of the past and present, the old and the new and tradition and innovation. Singh et al. (2007) highlighted in their study across Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, Sikkim, Meghalaya and Manipur, that the cultural significance and diversity of ethnic foods among tribal communities in these seven sister states of Northeast India. The authors argue how indigenous foods, especially the fermented products are the essential element to convey traditional knowledge, preserve cultural heritage and active participation in local ecological adaptation processes in these region. Emphasizing on the crucial role of tribal women in the preparation, preservation and transmission of culinary knowledge across generations, tt efficiently highlights the role of traditional food systems to food security and the maintenance of cultural identity. Despite this, the processes of modernization and the growing

preference for market-based foods among younger generations have gradually led to a decline in traditional food practices. This article thus recommends the urgent formulation of such policy frameworks for the preservation of traditional food knowledge systems based on intergenerational knowledge transfer in an integrated approach that includes awareness campaigns, education program and community participation. Reddy et. al. (2020) assessed the relationship between food, culture, and identity in the multicultural society of Singapore. The study was conducted in Singapore through 18 focus group discussions with the involvement of 130 women from the Chinese, Malay and Indian ethnic communities. With the use of thematic analysis, the authors found that food plays a significant role in the preservation of cultural identity; while simultaneously fostering social relationships and transmitting traditional beliefs across generations. This study revealed on how the respondents integrated foods from other ethnic groups into their everyday diets which led to the combination of culinary traditions and evolution of an idea of shared Singaporean identity. Taken together, these findings highlight the prominence of cultural food identities which encourages cross cultural culinary exchanges through the analysis of how Singapore's ethnic dynamics led to a unique mixture of eating practices. Hence the findings demonstrate the changing role of food in maintaining cultural continuity in the process of adapting to changing social and multicultural contexts. Therefore, instead of stereotypical dietary assumptions based on race, the research recommends for a public health initiatives to consider these complex food practices.

Although there is a lot of research on the role that food plays in identity construction and preservation, the role of Rai cuisine in identity formation is still underexplored, despite the fact that Rais have been actively working to reflect their ethnic identity through their traditional cuisine more apparently at the study site. As this work is a part of my broader research work on the Rai community, I decided to study it, not only to enhance my scholarly discourse but also to draw attention to the Rais' recent efforts to maintain their important culinary traditions in the rapidly changing contemporary Rai society in the Kalimpong district of the state of West Bengal.

Methods

For the study, semi-structured face-to-face interview was conducted to obtain qualitative data. To understand various factors like cultural identity, culinary expertise and their diverse experiences and engagement with cultural practices, the study made use of purposive sampling and 30 participants were included who belonged to the age group of 18 to 60 years and above. The study was conducted in the months of July and August 2024 and the area of study was Kalimpong district of West Bengal. For the present study, the unit of analysis included the elders, who were 60 years and above. It also included middle-aged adults whose age ranged from 40 to 59 years along with young adults who belonged to the age-group of 18 to 39 years. Additionally, it also included cooks/chefs and community leaders, for whom the age group was not specified. To ensure appropriate gender representation across age groups and provide the diverse perspective on Rai cuisine and cultural identity, three male and female participants were chosen for each above-mentioned study category. The collected data was then analyzed using a thematic approach.

Results

Following the analysis of the audio-recorded data, three major themes relevant to the study's objectives were identified, which are discussed in detail in the section that follows. These themes include culinary tradition and ethnic identity, the interaction between tradition and innovation and the challenges and consequences of modernisation and urbanisation on Rai cuisines.

Theme 1: Culinary Tradition and Ethnic Identity

In general, the respondents stated that food in the Rai community is itself the marker of their identity as their culinary habits are completely different from other ethnic communities of the broader Nepali fold in the research location. Therefore, the respondents expressed a need to highlight their unique identity; citing 'Rai

cuisine' as one of the vital indicators of their ethnic identity. The study highlights the importance of food culture in any ritual, a universal fact that is evident even in Rai society. One respondent stated:

> *अदुवा राई समाजमा महत्वपूर्ण छन्, जसलाई तीन-ढुंगा चुल्हो पूजा, जन्म, विवाह र मृत्युको अनुष्ठानहरूमा प्रयोग गरिन्छ। वाचिपा, चामल र जलेको कुखुराको पखेटाको धूलोबाट बनेको राईको परिकार हो, जुन 'प्रसाद अर्थात् पवित्र खाना को रूपमा सेवन गरिन्छ र जौको बियर सबै राई अनुष्ठानहरूमा अनिवार्य हुन्छ।*
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> [Ginger is crucial in Rai society for rituals like three-stoned hearth worship, birth, marriage and death rituals. Wachipa, a rice-based Rai dish with chicken and burnt feather powder is a significant Rai dish, served as 'prasad' i.e. consecrated food and millet beer is mandatory in all Rai ceremonies.] (Participant 1, Female, Middle-Aged Adult)

The elderly respondents indicated that the traditional alcoholic beverages, which are widely consumed and required in the Rai society are typically made from fermented maize, millet and rice with the use of homemade "marcha" and are served in a bamboo pie. The researcher also learnt of another variant of wachipa, known as Bungchipa, from middle-aged male respondent, who was between the ages of 40 and 59. In Rai, "bung" means flower and "wa" means chicken. Made from Damlapa flowers, which are used as a bitter ingredient, bungchipa is actually a vegetarian wachipa. Another respondent expressed greater appreciation for the current status of Rai cuisine in the contemporary society at the research location. She stated:

> *राई घरपरिवारहरूमा, विशेष गरी तिन-ढुंगा चुल्हो पूजा को कोठामा मात्र देखिएको वाचिपा अहिले मुख्य शहरमा स्थानीय परिकारको रूपमा मानिन थालेको छ, जसका लागि म आफूलाई निकै भाग्यशाली मान्दछु किनभने हामी राईहरूले हाम्रो संस्कृति जोगाउन मुखबाट मात्रै होइन, व्यवहारिक रूपमा पनि गर्नुपर्छ; तब मात्र वाचिपा, जुन सफलतापूर्वक राई पूजा घरबाट बाहिर आएको छ, व्यापक राष्ट्रिय र विश्वव्यापी दर्शकसम्म पुग्न सक्नेछ र त्यही बेला हाम्रो संस्कृति साँच्चिकै संरक्षण हुनेछ।*
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> [Wachipa, which was only looked at as consecrated food in Rai households, especially in their three-stoned hearth worship room, is now being considered local cuisine in maintown, for which I consider myself quite fortunate because we Rais just should not only say from our mouths that we should save our culture but should practically do it; only then will the wachipa, which has successfully come out of the Rai worship house, be able to reach a wider national and global audience and it is exactly then our culture will truly be conserved.] (Participant 2, Female, culinary entrepreneur/chef)

In addition, a young female respondent from 15th Mile Lower Bidhyang Dalapchand Khasmahal of Kalimpong region, stated that the name "Wachipa Dara" in their locality denotes the Rai area, highlighting the importance of Rai cuisine and the relationship between ethnic identity and culinary traditions. Thus, this very insight demonstrates how a person's identity is inextricably related to their culinary heritage in a variety of nuanced ways that one does not anticipate. The respondents also spoke of Kinema, a fermented soybean dish as the everyday common cuisine prepared in the Rai household. Furthermore, the present research explored that food is at the core of Rai culture and that food-related festivals and rituals are enthusiastically celebrated all year long. The celebration of "Sakela" festival, mainly celebrated twice a year by two names, Sakela Ubhauli that falls on the full moon day in April or May and is therefore called "Baisakh Purnima," and Sakela Udhauli, that falls on the full moon day in November or December and is therefore called "Mangsir Purnima" are distinguished by traditional dance, music, cuisine and rituals, serving as an integral component of their cultural identity.

Theme 2: The Interaction between Tradition and Innovation

Inclination towards the preservation of one's culture and tradition was expressed by all the respondents while simultaneously allowing the researcher to understand the relationship between traditional culinary practices and the modern innovative cuisine recipes. The ritualistic significance of the wachipa dish, when it is served as the sanctified food and they have to eat with revered respect after the worship of their ancestral three-stoned

hearth in the Rai household, was also admirably recalled by one of the elderly male respondents. However, the introduction of the Rai culinary entrepreneurship by Mrs. Manita Rai Tamang, who owns a stall named 'Wachipa Nana' (the name that is lovingly given to her by her customers), in the Thursday organic market (Bihibarey Local Haat, operative under the initiative of Akash Public Service Cooperative Society and with the help and approval of Kalimpong Municipality) in the main market of the district since May 18, 2023, is undoubtedly acting as a catalyst to enthuse the Rai community members to use the Rai culinary items as an agent to preserve their ethnic tradition in a contemporary modern society. Talking to Mrs. Manita, she expressed her joy at having actually been able to do something for her community despite being married to the Tamang member of the Nepali fold, for which she readily appreciated the constant motivation that she receives from her Tamang (in-laws) family members. She went on elaborating how it is essential to be innovative with her perpetual attempt to keep the tradition alive in the face of modernity. Wachipa, which is generally served in the Rai household as consecrated food, is exceedingly bitter because of its belief that bitter is tastier. She mentioned how the bitterness had to be lessened without sacrificing the other ingredients of the recipe, keeping in mind the customers from the entire Nepali community. Thus, according to her, introducing Wachipa to the main market as one of the very significant Rai cuisines is a challenge in and of itself. She said that if interpreted positively, such innovation and minor modifications were definitely advantageous in educating non-Rais about and allowing them to appreciate the uniqueness of Rai cuisine outside of the Rai household because Wachipa is a true reflection of Rai culture in the vibrant, multiethnic Nepali society at present time. Furthermore, all the respondents also indicated that the existence of ethnic stalls in open market space was advantageous in deciphering the message of Rais being the nature worshipper and that everything they consume has some connection to the natural world with its medicinal benefits. They thus justified that their very nature worship attribute is also evident in their culinary culture as it has symbolic significance of reflecting the community's connection to nature. For example, the use of wild vegetables, herbs and spices in their dishes not only improves the flavour but it also shows the environmental knowledge possessed by the Rai community. One elderly respondent stated:

> *हामीले परम्परागत राई वाचिपा बनाउँदा यसको उपचारात्मक गुणहरू हुन्छन्, राईको खानपान संस्कृति सधैं स्वास्थ्य लाभतर्फ केन्द्रित रहेको छ। वाङ्चय राईका कथाहरू अनुसार, राईहरूले वाचिपा खान्थे ताकि शरीरको दुःखाइ, खोकी र ज्वरोबाट मुक्त भएर आफ्नो थकानपछिको ऊर्जा प्राप्त गर्न सकुन्।*
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> [As the traditional Rai wachipa we make has curative qualities, the Rai cuisine culture has always been orientated towards health advantages. According to the ancestral Rai stories, Rais used to eat wachipa to get rid of body aches, coughs, and colds and gain energy after their tiring day.] (Participant 3, Female, Elders aged 60+)

The vast majority of respondents also discussed how the post-COVID situation has increased people's anxiety and drawn them to healthier organic food instead of the fried international cuisines that are being served in different regions of the district. The findings of this study indicate that the Rai people are very proud of their culinary customs and utilise food to convey who they are as a people. The communal eating experience thus has great cultural significance to reinforce their sense of belongingness. The preparation and consumption of traditional Rai food, according to them, are therefore considered a way of passing down their customs and values from one generation to the next in order to maintain social cohesion across generations.

Theme 3: The Challenges and Consequences of Modernisation and Urbanisation on Rai Cuisines

The substantial impact of urbanisation and modernisation on all facets of society, including Rai cuisine, was acknowledged by all the respondents. One respondent stated:

> *भन्न सकिँदैन कि हाम्रा धेरै आधुनिक दिनका दाइबहिनीहरू स्वैच्छिक रूपमा राई समाजबाट बिदा हुन्छन्; बरु, प्रायः अनपेक्षित परिस्थितिहरू र करियर अवसरहरूको कारणले उनीहरू आफ्नो सांस्कृतिक परिवेशबाट टाढा हुने गर्दछन्। यही कारणले युवा पुस्ताले*

आफ्नो परम्परागत खाद्य सम्पदा सम्बन्धी पर्याप्त ज्ञान नहुनु सम्भावित छ, जुन आफैमा गम्भीर चिन्ताको विषय हो। त्यसैले, यदि हामी हाम्रो संस्कृति जोगाउन चाहन्छौँ भने, यसलाई गर्ने सक्षम हातहरूको उपस्थिति जरूरी छ; त्यसैले यही अहिलेको राई समाजको मुख्य चिन्ता हो।

[It is not feasible to say that many of our modern-day brothers and sisters leave the Rai society voluntarily; rather, it is primarily due to unforeseen circumstances and career opportunities that cause them to become estranged from their cultural environment. This is likely the reason why the younger generation lacks sufficient knowledge of their culinary heritage, which is a serious concern in and of itself. Hence, if we are to preserve our culture, we have to have the existence of the capable hands that would do it; hence this is the greater worry of the contemporary Rai society.] (Participant 4, Male, Rai community leader)

The study also highlights the criticism and mockery faced by individuals promoting culinary entrepreneurship to preserve their culture, sometimes on their desire to wear ethnic attire while serving the Rai dishes to the customers and other times on their greed to use the idea of the ancient 'consecrated food' as a medium to earn their everyday income. Therefore, for Rai chefs and entrepreneurs who are always attempting to reflect their ethnic identity through Rai cuisines in the contemporary society of the research location, maintaining the sanctity of the ethnic Rai cuisine in the modern urbanised society has undoubtedly been a challenging endeavour. Talking about similar challenges, an elderly respondent expressed his view that the introduction of Wachipa into the market should not be seen by society as a sign of disrespect from the Rais towards their sacred food. He emphasized that presenting Wachipa as a Rai cuisine for sale does not imply that the Rais have compromised their traditional ritualistic cuisine for financial gain. For the Rais, wachipa was, is, and forever will be the most consecrated dish and they fully understand its spiritual importance when it is served. He clarified that just because it is a sacred food for the Rais, it does not mean they are selling their 'Prasad' in the market to make a living. These are two distinct concepts that he believes, everyone should understand properly. The culinary traditions of the Rais are, thus, according to him, being defended against possible defamation, with the sale of the Wachipa staged as a defensive move to maintain the long-term goal of the Rais community's cultural identity. The respondents claimed that there has been a greater change in the availability of ingredients for making traditional Rai cuisines. They claimed that because of the range of career opportunities, the Rai households' means of sustenance have also changed significantly. Urban migration has ultimately resulted in a shortage of the authentic ingredients needed to make Rai cuisine. The local chickens needed to make wachipa, for example, cannot be substituted with broilers. Additionally, people's desire to try the widely accessible international alcoholic beverages in place of the Rais traditional millet beer has become very apparent in recent years. According to the respondents, even those who are aware of the process for making the local beer occasionally hesitate to do so because of the effort and ingredients needed. This is how the communal eating habits of the Rai community have been enormously impacted by the growing trend of urban lifestyle and exposure to the global cuisine at the present time in the research location. The study also demonstrated how the diverse urban population made it difficult for Rais to regularly maintain their traditional eating patterns in contrast to more homogeneous rural communities where cultural interchange is more common and accessible. Furthermore, a middle-aged respondent also pointed out that people often accuse them of clinging to their culinary traditions just to gain ST status today, to which he responded that no one would agree with that claim. It was noted that the Rais expressed dissatisfaction when their Limbu Kirat counterparts were granted ST status under the Indian constitution in 2003. They believe that the "Rai-Limbu" have always been interconnected, and despite their hopes of receiving ST status alongside the Limbu, that did not happen. However, according to the majority of the study's participants, their efforts to utilise their culinary practices to express their ethnic identity are not solely driven by the aspiration to gain ST status; instead, they aim to assert their identity as Kirat within today's multicultural society. Thus,

this has emerged as one of the major obstacles that contemporary Rais must overcome. The present study also allowed for the observation of the influence of proselytisation on Rai cuisine. One respondent stated:

I was born into a Christian family, but my parents were converts. So I still remember how my mother used to secretly cook wachipa, constantly warning us against telling strangers what we had. As a child, I did not understand then why she did that and so I did what my mother told me to do. But now, when I look back, I can finally understand that wachipa was consecrated food for worshippers of the 'Tin-Chula Dhunga,' and as Christians, we were afraid to admit to the outsiders that we were actually eating the home-cooked wachipa, despite being a Christian. Many years later, I eventually asked my mother why she had advised us to keep quiet about eating wachipa. She said that it was because, in Rai houses at the time, wachipa was considered "prasad," or sanctified food, which is typically distributed only after the tin-chula dhunga rite. Still she secretly kept on preparing it in an attempt to silently sustain her ethnic identity, even after becoming a Christian. The recent opening of the Wachipa stall in the main market is a huge relief because it has helped me realise that even though there are religious differences, it allows me to trace my ethnic identity to the community that I truly belong to. Of course, I am extremely proud to call myself "A Rai. (Participant 5, Male, Young adult)

Although the sample size of the current qualitative study makes it impossible to generalise the findings to the wider population, four out of the thirty respondents identified proselytisation as a major barrier to maintaining their ethnic culinary traditions. Some of the Rai cuisine, they claimed, was so closely associated with the ritualistic Rai religious practices of the three-stone hearth that it became nearly impossible or at times a secretive matter and a source of mockery once they chose to convert to a different religion. Therefore, despite the current challenges of modernisation and urbanisation on Rai cuisine, the introduction of Rai cuisine in the local stall of the main market of the research location is unquestionably the major booster for many proselytised Rais who proudly choose to reflect their identity through Rai cuisine.

Figures and Tables

Fig. 1. 'Wachipa Nana' Stall in Kalimpong Thursday Organic Haat.
Fig. 2. Researcher with one of her elderly respondents in the research location.

Tabe 1: Profile of all Respondents for this Study

Unit of Analysis	Age Group	Gender Distribution
Elders	60 years and older	3 Males and 3 Females
Middle-Aged Adults	40-59 years	3 Males and 3 Females
Young Adults	18-39 years	3 Males and 3 Females
Cooks/Chefs	No specified age group	3 Males and 3 Females
Community Leaders	No specified age group	3 Males and 3 Females
Total Participants	-	30

Discussion

The findings above support the stated objective of this study to explore deeper perceptions among Rais about the significance of their food in preserving their ethnic identity. The thirty respondents who were purposively selected in the study area emerged to be very useful in eliciting the information that the researcher intended to investigate. Findings from this study provide an elaborated diverse perspective on how gastronomic traditions function as an indicator of ethnic identity among the Rai people of Kalimpong. All the respondents unanimously gave importance to Rai cuisine as a major symbol of their ethnic identity that differentiates them from other ethnic communities. This demonstrates that for the Rai community, food is much more than an element for human survival and it plays a vital role in self-definition, community togetherness and in the celebration of culture. The focus on specific Rai dishes, such as wachipa and kodo ko jhaad stresses its importance in various household rituals and life events such as births, marriages and deaths. The reference to Jay Shivahang's (2011) insights on the Mundhum, the sacred book of the Rai people, efficiently illustrates how Rai culinary practices are rooted in a rich tradition of knowledge that encompasses practical scientific principles. He understands Mundhum as the origin of Kirati culture, lifestyle, eating practices and ceremonies, further indicating that Kiratis had actually led to the discovery of scientific knowledge through practical invention and its application, such as the fermentation and distillation processes to prepare alcohol, which is a vital necessity in all Kirati rituals. However, according to him, due to the lack of scientific investigation or analysis, the inventions were only limited to oral tradition of tribal rituals. Thus, the author argues that contemporary physics, zoology, botany and chemistry see the Mundum philosophy as the origin and pinnacle of knowledge since, in his view, it provided the framework for the development of these fields. 'Wachipa, ' an important part of Rai rituals was considered as 'prasad' in the Rai household. This shows that the culinary practices are not just about taste or nutrition but are also filled with spiritual essence. The insights from the respondents reflected a dual interpretation of maintaining tradition, at the same time adjusting to contemporary contexts. The findings from the narratives of young female chef indicated that bringing wachipa into the wider culinary scene represented a shift towards greater recognition and appreciation of Rai cuisine and it stressed the importance of community efforts to preserve and promote one's culture in the contemporary society that is rapidly changing. The references to another variation of wachipa i.e. 'Bungchipa' (rice cooked with flowers and leaves of Damlapa plant) brings into view the high degree of diversity in Rai culinary traditions that seem to coexist in harmony with one another. The Rai belief on how the bitterness of the wachipa reflects its quality; hints at a cultural focus on distinct tastes that might not align with mainstream culinary practices. The narratives also highlighted the use of local terminologies such as "Wachipa Dara," which not only reinforce Rai identity but also situate it within the broader geographical context. This reflects how food can also be a symbol of regional identity and a unifying force and pride for its community. Apart from this, the important role of food in the Sakela festival also helped in promoting common identity. The respondents collectively stated to maintain their cultural identity through food, with a particular focus on wachipa dish, which occupies historic ritual significance in Rai society. A prominent figure in this regard, at present time, is Mrs. Manita Rai Tamang, who runs a food stall called 'Wachipa Nana' in Kalimpong. She expressed her dedication to revive 'wachipa' by finding ways to make it less bitter, while still keeping its traditional roots intact. Her work exemplifies the challenge of making these dishes appealing to a wider audience while showcasing important aspects of Rai culture in contemporary society. Such revival effort were seen as a positive mechanism to educate non-Rai individuals about the unique features of their cuisine, further strengthening the idea that food is truly the vital expression of cultural identity. Respondents also highlighted their commitment to make use of the natural ingredients in their cooking, which reflects a deep connection to nature and traditional medicinal knowledge. The study also shows how the trend towards the consumption of healthier, organic foods in post-COVID era has led to a change in consumer preferences due to increasing inclination of contemporary people towards indigenous, health-focused dishes over international cuisines. The analysis of the field data thus, illustrates how the Rai community manages its equilibrium between acceding to tradition and developing innovative practices in order to sustain its cultural identity. The current research thus, examined the possible

ways in which Rai cuisine and cultural identity were at risk from problems of modernisation and urbanisation and how there was a disjuncture between the Rai culture and its youth. It pointed to the challenges faced by Rai chefs and entrepreneurs in continuing to provide traditional food in an urban environment with a demographic mix. The impact of proselytisation that complicates the preservation of traditional eating practices was also thoroughly understood through the current study. Therefore, the analysis highlighted a tension between modern influences and traditional practices, revealing the hardships and endurance of the Rai community as they work to restore and preserve their cultural food identity at present time in Kalimpong. The major strength of the study was the semi-structured face-to-face interview session with the research participants, which was helpful in building the rapport to discuss the sensitive topics thoroughly. Due to time constraints, the limited number of samples, turned out to be a major drawback of the study as the findings cannot be generalized to a larger population. Therefore, quantitative research using survey methods among a larger audience would likely be the direction of future research in order to supplement an extensive comprehension of how eating habits shape and reflect social identities in larger social, cultural and historical contexts at present time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be conceived that Rai cuisine plays a significant role in the maintenance and preservation of Rai ethnic identity in Kalimpong District. The findings have adequately revealed how the indigenous food pattern not only serves as a means of sustenance but is simultaneously an expression of cultural heritage and social cohesion. The current study thus suggests the recognition and appreciation of the indigenous culinary traditions of the Rai community to foster the essence of cultural resilience and identity preservation amidst the growing challenges of globalization in a continuously changing modern society.

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